

I Am Legendary

by Mainevent117

Category: Halo

Genre: Horror, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2008-01-04 01:51:49

Updated: 2008-03-08 01:24:47

Packaged: 2016-04-27 01:34:21

Rating: T

Chapters: 5

Words: 9,818

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: UNSC Captain Robert Neville is the last survivor of a new strain of Flood outbreak. As he searches for a cure to a threat which could spread throughout the universe, he encounters a group of survivors fleeing a different threat. R&R Please

1. Sunrise

1,365 Days Since Outbreak

June 24, 2574 - Earth Standard

It was one of those days he knew he wouldn't be able to go outside, where the sun was so low that they'd start especially early. The clouds overhead hung like a damning mist, blocking the only true safety he had anymore. A shrill, intimidating wind shrieked as it swirled through the city, kicking dust and dirt at it went. Through the two-pane plexiglass he watched and waited, cradling his assault rifle in his arms as he rocked back in forth. Though the sun had only risen five hours ago, it was already close to dusk; a tragic flaw of being stuck so near a pole during the winter months on this planet. But then again, what wasn't tragic these days?

1,364 Days Earlier

"Lieutenant, we need to evacuate now. They've breached the city and nobody's sure how long it'll be before they get to the pads."

"I, I need five more minutes to collect my data. Without this data it'll just happen again and we won't be any closer to stopping it than we were this time." The soldier-scientist tapped furiously at his keypad, wishing incessantly that the thing would work faster.

"You've got what you've got Lieutenant, but when that horn goes offâ€|" Captain Ryan terminated his statement with a distressed glare into the forest.

"It, it's like it's internal. Almost viral. This data can't be correct then."

"Then scrap it Robert, and let's get the hell out of here."

"I don't understand though, I don't understand. It has to be correct, I did it myself. But this doesn't make any sense."

"I'll give you two seconds to explain, slowly, what the hell you're rambling about before I knock your batshit crazy ass out and throw you into the warthog myself." Jermey Ryan leaned over Neville's shoulder, staring at a text wall of doom. Spreadsheets of data predicting imminent disaster and unstoppable carnage.

"All of our information about these creatures says they're parasitic. Every encounter with them has proven this to be true. But the outbreaks here, they're occurring too quickly and spreading too rapidly; even for them. I ran as many of our known origins through the database as I could, and they don't match any spread pattern we'd expect from a hive pattern like the Flood."

"So, so what? Someone's spreading it, or they've found a new way to infect us? What are you saying?"

"I'm saying Ryan that they've mutated to attack our genetic code directly. They don't need direct ogranismal contact with a human host anymore to spread. Somehow they've gone airborne, they're infecting us from the inside." Neville turned to face the man directly, his forehead beading profusely with sweat that ran down the frame of his black-rimmed glasses.

Ryan stood up, hands bristling through his short-shorn dirty blonde hair before resting on the back of his scalp. He exhaled deeply, not believing what he was hearing but hearing it nonetheless. A blast of dirt blew through the door only seconds before the horn went off. Lieutenant Cortman had arrived late, as usual, but with the unexpected benefit of a covered Warthog.

"Is all of your shit on file and ready to move?"

"Yes sir."

"Then we'll get to the pad's as soon as possible and get out of here. We can contact FleetCom from space and tell them that we need a planet-wide quarantine. You and the rest of the eggheads upstairs can mull over your data all you'd like until you figure this thing out."

Ryan grabbed Neville by his shirt collar and pushed him towards the door, grabbing the BR55 leaning against the doorframe before activating the bunker's security. Neville and Ryan stretched into the warthog's passenger seats before sliding the lightly-armored door mount closed. Cortman floored the vehicle and it's massive engine thrust them quickly onward, spraying dirt and pebbles back into the forest .

"Captain Ryan, we have a massive problem." Neville said, leaning forward between Cortman and Ryan.

"Which is?

"The pad's security protocols are completely inadequate now. They're checking for direct contact infections, not latent or dormant infections. We could be evacuating hundreds of carriers right now. We could literally be exporting this mutated Flood strain for them."

Cortman's face shifted slightly sideways in surprise, but Captain Ryan's face maintained a stoic air of disbelief and fear.

June 25, 2574- Sunrise

Neville tried to shake the nightmares away like only so much grogginess, but that fleeting sense of dread still lingered. He was soaked in sweat and the almost metallic taste of saliva that'd been exposed to air too long went down bitterly. A rapid and unnerving thump, thump, thump chattered through his chest and he shivered despite having a slightly elevated core temperature level; the fleeting residual effects of adrenaline were always unpleasant as a daily reminder of the twilight's torment. His fingers crinkled across empty bags and finally found a glass. It was three day old brandy at ten in the morning; and it went down like it.

> "Bullet, get over here." He looked around the room, nothing. "Bullet," he repeated again with several whistles. A long black and gray tail weaved between the garbage as the sugar glider scampered to him. The tiny marsupial was fast as lightning and could climb up anything, but not especially smart; he had dogs for that. She hug-climbed her way up his leg and nudged into the bottom of his coral red shirt before using his chest hair as a ladder to his neck. Her tiny head popped out of the collar and stared around quickly before climbing out and curling into a tight ball in his chest pocket. He pulled a mini-wheat from a nearby box and held it out; her miniature human-like hands grasping the sweet treat as she began to feverishly gobble it down.
 "We're gettin' low on these, you better hope we find another box soon." She chatter-squawked her displeasure without stopping her consumption. "Rambo, Tango!" The Rottweiler and German Shepherd pair stormed into the living quarters hurriedly, panting and nipping at his legs. He ruffled their heads and patted them on the backs.

> Neville turned on the display. Several digital data feeds crawled across the projection. Sunrise was at eight fifteen a.m. Earth standard and sunset would be two eleven p.m. He checked his watch and cursed at the blank screen. It had died overnight; he'd have to go the inside of the city to find the right batteries, and he hated going deep. The inside of the city had been hit worst, and the streets were impossible to traverse by vehicle. At least the dogs would get out, he consoled himself.

> Cloud cover was sparse to none, which was very good; though his late start to an already short day was somewhat irritating. He'd spent several days early on figuring out how to upload the automated water and power station feeds to his station, and everything was greenlit there. The station's artificial intelligences operated them with almost zero human input, and there had been only one temporary glitch in the system so far. Sometimes he wondered why he even bothered to upload the recent media section of his news feeder, as there hadn't been a single change in more than three years, but something irrational inside of him hoped a bit everyday that it would all just change.
 The projection changed to show the most recent data about the H81 Viral Form-Airborne Infectible contagion.

Neville's personal research over the last three years had made broad insights towards this "new" and voracious form of the flood organism. He scanned his own three and a half year-old research paper warning of the impending threat.

_With regards to the possibility of an airborne form of the flood contaminant, and in full understanding that our current knowledge of these beings is in contrast with my hypothesis, I nevertheless urge the panel to address my findings... [following the death of Organism Zero- the "Gravemind"- it is my belief that the loss of primary hive control and thought processes have driven the parasite to revert to a more primitive form of reproduction... Although no direct form of dispersal beyond direct contact has been verified as of this writing, sporoform release by the infection forms is highly suspect... Retrieval of chemicals produced by recovered organisms also suggests that the Flood forms are capable of producing additives similar to those applied to known synthetic chemical weapons to preserve them longer in the air. A current means of production is under investigation, but the presence of these chemicals is only further indication of a possible airborne infection evolution- or devolution- by these creatures. _

He closed the file for the one thousand three hundred sixty-sixth time. It'd been too late, moved too slowly through proper channels, and conflicted with too many other people's own thoughts to ever do any good; and when the outbreak finally began there was nothing anyone was prepared to do about it. Fortunately, although Neville found that word ironic, it had a seventy-five percent kill rate in healthy humans. For four percent with a special, non-fatal genetic condition, the airborne form had had no effect. Unfortunately, the twenty-one percent that were susceptible changed drastically and quickly. The airborne form, however, was not as potent or integrated genetically by the host. These organisms were equally as strong, fast, and voracious as their counterparts; but, unable to synthesize any of the molecules responsible for cell repair and maintenance as a result of UV radiation, they rapidly went into cell degradation and abnormal apoptosis.

> So Neville traveled by day, foraging for food and supplies. Building by building he searched through the former homes of fifteen million in the largest of twelve cities on a planet roughly the size of Earth. Now it was all a dead zone, restricted on military star charts and censored in official records. The remaining colonies and Earth itself had been plenty busy following the Human-Covenant war to worry too much about a small fringe world colony; more than happy to move on with their own lives than hear any more of death or war. For First Lieutenant Robert Jacob Neville, this was the one thousand three-hundred sixty-sixth day of his new life as the sole known survivor of a terrible outbreak, and like every day before it the day seemed to grow a little shorter as the dusk came a little faster. But he had been the one to predict it's arrival, and he would be the one to fix this. He would be the one to make it right. As every day before it, he would search and gather; hoping to live to the next day. At least, he thought to himself, _there'll be a bit of adventure today._

2. Rain Delay

**1,367 Days Earlier **

There was screaming. It echoed as loudly as the bombs in the streets, only punctuated by the equally unsettling staccato of gunfire. The sound of screams is something no one ever gets used to, or so Neville's father had told him while remembering back to his time as a Covenant prisoner of war. So far he'd been right. Cortman slithered the nose of the warthog between cars like an olive green snake, nudging those too closely packed out of the way with blunt force.

"General Guzman will be on board the Spirit of Justice in orbit. When we can reach him we'll give him an immediate update. Unfortunately, that'll mean that everyone on the pads gets left behind." Captain Jermay Ryan yelled over the hiss of this anaconda's engine.

Neville said nothing.

"All of this goddamn debris is making it hard Cap." Cortman gunned it particularly hard and the vehicle's massive tires crushed a car on the right side, forcing Robert to scramble for a handhold as the craft lurched upwards and then plummeted back down.

"Fuck!" Inertia slammed the crew forward as Lieutenant Cortman came to a sliding stop. From an alleyway only inches to Robert's left a MT100 Thunderbolt armored personnel carrier entered the roadway, its twin top-mounted auto-cannons swiveling to fire on a swarm of infected hosts. A low, shrill whistle filled the cabin space. Ryan and Cortman looked around, but Neville looked up. Two AV-14F Hornet close support aircraft were buzzing through the city's cramped corridors.

The two aircraft were briefly silhouetted by a magnificent splash of orange-white as two Shortsword bombers screeched by at several hundred feet. Six tiny ordnance released from their underbellies before erupting into a rotating dispenser of several hundred bomblets each. The ground trembled as the thunderous explosions decimated everyone and everything that had occupied the highway. One Hornet zipped into a holding position directly above the APC as the other continued towards the pads.

"This big bitch is in our way!" Cortman laid the horn on thick, but it was useless, the Thunderbolt was going nowhere. A torrent of dull thuds sounded like a metallic rain on the roof as spent cartridges from the hornets' tri-barreled machine guns cascaded to earth. A milk-white smoke trail bubbled into view above the roof of the APC before the familiar discharge of a SPNKR missile engulfed the nose of the attack craft in fire. She began to spin wildly as her cockpit emerged from the fireball a charred nothing. One wing clipped a nearby office building's corner, shattering glass and breaking a thin metal beam before shearing the fuselage.

"Backup, backup, backup!" Ryan screamed while Cortman reflexively accelerated in reverse. Neville felt the warm breath of Satan on his face and his fierce touch as the vehicle's windshield exploded. Cortman's neck was sliced cleanly along the right side, blood spewing from the wound in rhythmic crimson spurts. Ryan vomited into his elbow while reaching to apply pressure, and Neville's entire world coalesced into a swirling fountain of colors.

Cortman slumped over as Ryan reached back towards Neville. All of the

oranges , yellows, and blacks grew together before disappearing completely into nothing. Only Ryan's now-distant voice was left, and fading quickly.

"You're going to be okay soldier, you're going to be okay."

**Today- 1,366 Days Since Outbreak **

Neville's index and middle finger rubbed the scar on his cheek absent mindedly as he tried to remember back on that night. It was hard to come up with much at all, but anything beyond the crash was useless. After the blackout he'd awoken with a crude bandage of ripped fabric, most likely Ryan's, around his temple. For several minutes he'd thought he was blind or dead, or maybe that was just what being dead felt like; his arms and legs ached at every urge to move. Eventually he'd pushed the rubble and garbage covering him away. It was dark, with only the gentle glow of a small fire several meters away. That fire danced in the glassy reflections of Ryan's lifeless eyes, still open and staring almost purposefully in his direction. A pool of blood had coagulated around him, and a swarm of flies darted in and out of the viscous liquid.

Shell casings were littered all across the ground directly in front of him, and it was only then Neville had noticed the MA5B on the ground and the M6D pistol still in Ryan's grip. Several yards away, the bodies of a dozen or so flood combat forms had been riddled with bullets, but it apparently hadn't been enough. A trail of bloody, deformed footprints disappeared down the alleyway beyond the Captain's corpse.

Robert was snapped back to reality when a blackbird collided with the Plexiglas. It's tiny neck was broken and the fowl dropped to the ground silently. Rambo and Tango were at the window instantly, panting and yipping eagerly. "Aight boys, we can go out. I've got to run a few errands today anyway."

Neville's truck bumped along the rugged dirt road from the bunker back into the city. Large black craters pockmarked the streets and many of the buildings suffered equally disfiguring scars as a result of the numerous bombing runs from that short but fierce war. Weeds crept up through the holes and cracks in the cement and walkways; large vines of ivy wrapped and strangled the stoplights at several intersections. The outskirts of town, those first six or seven miles of four-lane highway, were relatively smooth. It was the innermost sections of town where the mass exodus of vehicles and people fleeing for the escape pads had stalled. The stall quickly led to a massive overflow, with those in the front of the line abandoning their vehicles to make a dash for safety on foot. Those in the back had never stood a chance.

Every car Robert passed as he moved into the "Black Zone" had suffered the same fate. Many of their doors had been splashed with blood as their occupants were struck down attempting to flee, but those that weren't had enormous dents in their sides and jagged, broken windows covered in more blood. The most striking part was the lack of bodies, there were never any bodies; the flood didn't leave bodies. In that way, Neville believed, they never left any survivors either. Even in death these people had been converted into killing machines that turned to ravage or infect their fellow citizens.

He slowed to a casual stop as the road finally ended amidst a mass of interwoven and mangled cars too thick to pass. The dogs stared at him longingly from the passenger seat, emitting low whimpering growls and panting heavily at the anticipation of the new. A flick of the release latch sent the two armored side covers sliding away; the rottweiler and German shepherd leapt from the truck, smelling and investigating everything they encountered.

"This way," Robert yelled as he disappeared down an alleyway. The massive dogs sprinted after him, nipping at each other's tails as they ran. The alley emerged into a large open square at the center of an outdoor shopping complex. There were tables and chairs in a small open-air cafe to his left- some still erect but most hastily knocked on their sides - on his right was a wall-sized projection loop of three year old new releases. *_Gravemind's Grave: End of the Flood Menace* _was a particularly well done propaganda piece he'd seen several times; it was amusing now, though it hadn't been intended to come off that way.

With its high, flat roof visible over the courtyard's low wall, the Supply Depot Superstore's dark blue paint mixed with the dark gray sky to form a dark and foreboding color palette. The four lanes between the square and the store were, amazingly, even more congested than the previous stretch of highway. In the hectic rush of people trying foolishly to buy some last-minute supplies or luxuries a ten-car pileup had completely bottlenecked this section of the city. The burned-out hulk of an overturned tractor trailer was riddled with bullets, it's driver seat occupied by a weathered corpse slumped awkwardly to the side in its seat, held partially upright by its safety restraints.

"Shit, shit, shit. It's not supposed to rain today." Neville slung his rifle and put his hands to his head in contemplation. The darkening sky was approaching quickly, and a gentle pitter-patter of fat, globular water bursts smacked to the ground every few seconds. A fiercely jagged lightning bolt snapped a booming report overhead, and forced him to a casual jog. The dogs sprinted by frantically, stopped only by the closed doors of the superstore; they pawed and nudged at the partitions but they failed to move. Robert skipped up the sidewalk and huddled under the short overhang.

"It can't ever be easy can it?" The dogs whimpered their responses as another clasp of thunder broke the sky open overhead. Thin, fast razor droplets came down in sheets of water that blanketed the city. He jammed the blade of his field knife into the crack of the doors and wedged them several inches apart before working his fingers and finally hands in. With a strained scissor motion he parted them slowly; finally, working them apart enough to stick his boot in and open them fully.

Tango and Rambo darted into the store several feet and shook themselves vigorously. "Oh this is just fucking beautiful," Neville cursed as he confronted the vast darkness. The entire store was blacked out, the only illumination coming in the form of a dull white light every several meters from equally spaced and opaque skylights overhead. The power was on in the city, but not here. It could be a blown transformer or knocked out power line, or just as easily a substation that had been knocked out during the fight to evacuate the city. Regardless, he was facing the world inside through a palette of blacks, whites, and shades of gray. He quickly wrapped his gun's

strap around his arm and tucked it neatly into his right shoulder while grabbing a cart with his free hand.

"Find out, go, go," he whispered to the dogs. The duo's heads swiveled around, their noses sniffing intently as they moved in short bursts a few meters ahead at a time before ducking into belly crawls and then getting back up. His night-scope illuminated the store in short, circular sections as he swept his rifle around cautiously. It'd be impossibly to see anything among the countless clothing racks, behind six foot high palettes of dried goods piled down the central aisles, or until he moved into an aisle itself. The hairs on his neck pricked up as his skin bubbled with nervous anticipation. A flash overhead momentarily brought the room to two shades lighter gray before going quickly back to near black.

His breath came out in stuttered, silent gasps as he moved as quickly and quietly down the rows as possible. A tank of water ahead was covered in algae and the rotten husks of lobster. The dogs continued to whimper after every burst of thunder. If it was canned he put it into the buggy, regardless of what. He could come back later to get picky. It only took two aisles to fill his buggy, and he was very ready to get the hell out of dodge. Two short whistles brought the dogs running back to his side as he left the buggy next to a palette of half-decomposed doughnuts and pastries.

Shit, the batteries are at the other end of the store, he thought bitterly. He moved to a quick jog, the dogs' nails making rhythmic clacks on the tiling as the trio moved. He stopped at the pharmacy briefly and slipped several packages of cold-and-flu medicine into his chest pocket before crossing the aisle and pocketing as many batteries as he could fit. He turned back and jogged back towards the food aisles. He passed hangar after hangar of clothes on his right and racks of magazines and check out counters to his left. His luminescent green-white night vision illuminated the darkness fifty feet at a time though his one closed eye. Rambo and Tango dropped to a crawl and whimpered again as a thunderbolt clapped through the store, but they didn't get back up. Robert halted several feet away and turned back to them.

"Get over here!" He whispered as loudly as he could. They only whimpered, more loudly now, and shuffled back when he tried to approach. "What the hell is the matter with y'all? It's just a little thunder. Get up you big girls you." From behind he heard the bone-rattling scrape of rusty metal grating together rhythmically as the shopping cart's wheels spun. He caroused around, the reflective metallic glimmer of his buggy slowing to a stop in his view piece. The building shook as a particularly close bolt struck. The saliva in his mouth felt thick and hot as he swallowed deeply, his chest convulsing with a thunderstorm of its own. Each inhalation was a challenge as he rattled off short breaths.

There it was, bumping unwittingly into the cart as it shuffled along. It was the image which had burned itself into his retinas through his nightmares. It's sickly, ivory white skin glistened with moisture and even in the emerald vision he could make out its thick, dark veins rippling under the skin. The face was relaxed unnaturally, the jaw slackening to reveal a half bitten-off tongue and slimy yellow teeth. Its eyes seemed massive in their sunken sockets, glazed to a milky white with only dark patches visible in each orb. This was what the Flood had become. Those it couldn't sink it's hook-like tentacles

into directly had been metamorphosed into these abominations.

Neville let out two rapid, barely-audible hisses as he moved away from the creature and to the door. Alone, this was no match for his MA5B Assault Rifle's shredder rounds; versatile, dangerous projectiles which splintered on impact and tore through light armor while tearing flesh into bloody pulp. But alone was not where the Flood got its power. It's power was in numbers, and the sound of his shot would draw ten, perhaps a hundred, more to him. The dogs nudged up to his feet, bearing their teeth in attack stances but remaining utterly silent. He snapped his fingers once and they bolted forward, streaking through the clothes. Rambo bulled the creature's legs, tearing it's withered flesh and cracking the porous bone already riddled with thousands of unfixed micro-fractures. Tango pounced immediately on it's throat as the torso smacked to the ground, ripping the esophagus and vocal chords cleanly out. Puffs of air made a sickly, sticky sound as its lungs collapsed and expanded rapidly, trying to moan for help. Neville raced to the beast and brought the butt of his weapon down with a crunching noise that made him shiver reflexively.

He sighted the weapon again quickly, and he was right. Two or three others were moving down the central aisle, as of yet unaware of him but gaining steadily. As he moved into the light near the exits a cacophony of moans chased from inside. Another thunderclap had no effect whatsoever on the dogs or Neville as they sprinted at full speed through the courtyard. Robert only looked back once before he disappeared into the alley, the pearly flesh of Flood emerging from the blackness in discordant droves; none of which seemed to be able to sense him through the downpour.

The dogs dashed in a unanimous leap through the door and sulked quickly to make themselves as small as possible in the seats. Robert jammed the rifle into its holster between his seat and the vehicle's rear section and made a one legged jump into the seat. His palm slammed the emergency shut button and the heavy metal panels crashed into position before locking with a series of resounding metallic thuds. The warthog's engine was barely audible in the rain as it seemingly battled God himself for most jarring noise. In a flurry of motion he slipped the beast into reverse and bulled into the side of a sports car. He slipped the vehicle into first gear and it's large rubber wheels slipped once and then dug into the asphalt. It bucked forward and he weaved his way as quickly as possible through the vehicles, only slowing as he came to the outskirts of town.

In reality, he was as close to completely safe as possible in the armored beast. At three metric tons base the Flood would never be able to flip it, but in his even heavier up-armored version that was even more of a mute point. But close to completely safe was not completely safe to Robert, and his muscles were tensed involuntarily as he headed home. Image enhancement equipment- a mix of infrared, sonographic, and thermal scanning devices- fed him a display almost completely devoid of rain.

The warthog slid to a halt as the fiery red-white flare of engines crossed overhead. A friend-or-foe identifier encapsulated the distant object and classified it almost immediately as the communications suite automatically attempted an uplink. It returned a response almost immediately: UNSC Lancet, Chirpotera Class Stealth Prowler-

Decommissioned January 21st, 2513- Crew 4. It streaked onward, descending rapidly in the distance at what could only be the city's air hub. Almost as quickly as the FOF ping had returned the information the computer lost it. Goddamnit.

He looked at the dogs and then outside. The warthog slipped back into first gear and began a slow creep forward. Robert cursed himself for what would probably get him killed. He turned the wheels right, down the highway linking the city with its airport, and gunned it. No rest for the wicked, he mused.

3. The Good Host

1,366 Days After Outbreak- Lazarus Spaceport Highway

Lazarus was a peculiar name for a spaceport. Completed in 2489, a tragic and mysterious fuel line rupture led to the incineration of the facility and the twenty-four commercial and private ships berthed to her. Seven hundred and twelve souls perished in an aqueous-blue fireball that scorched the earth for nearly a half-mile in every direction. For the few visitors to this relatively back world planet in the years before the Covenant and Flood this was only a distraction, a curious bit of trivia to pass along before sight-seeing. To those who lived here, however, it was a monument to the hardiness of these people and their determination to succeed. To Robert Neville, it was just another sign that this planet was hell in general, and not his personally. It took what it wanted, and though the people thought that the fact that the planet hadn't taken the spaceport a second time meant they'd somehow conquered a mystical beast; the truth was that she'd only gotten more vengeful. To him, it certainly seemed like it.

Today though, it was the embodiment of its namesake. A place that, like this world, had been for too long dead. Now it was the site of life for him; and a way off this God-forsaken planet. The highway here was empty. The spaceport had been the first place closed when the Flood attacked, and every vehicle in the city that could move had headed for the military's Portable Aid Deployment Spaceports (PADS), naively believing they'd be saved. Neville was sure this was the only stretch of asphalt for a hundred miles that hadn't been choked with the shells of a half-million cars and trucks. Maybe this was his lucky day, it had stopped raining and every couple of miles a narrow beam of sun broke through the heavy gray clouds.

As he approached the broad gates of the primary complex he engaged full traction control and pushed into the warthog's overdrive gear. She revved furiously, straining the RPM gauge and fluctuating the speedometer at one thirty-five. His fists clinched white and the dogs huddled as low to the backseats as possible. The quarter-inch thick steel bars buckled and warped, wrapping around the front of the warthog with a loud snap as concrete was shorn away from its foundation. The jumble of metal on metal and moving synthetic rubber spun to a sparking halt twenty meters from where the gate had originally stood.

"Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit." Neville repeated to himself, his hands still clutching the wheel and his eyes wide. He sat there for an entire minute, repeating the words over and over until the salty sting of sweat bit into his vision. The vehicle's engine had died

when he let go of the clutch at a dead standstill. He popped the transmission back into first and reignited the hydrogen engines. Fortunately, the steel shell of fencing that had conformed to the front of his chassis disengaged as he moved into reverse.

Tango stuck his head between the front and back seats with a whimper. "Don't you damn criticize me now, I don't need this. We're about to leave, so sit back and hush." The dog reluctantly slid back to the floorboards, his ears folding over his eyes as he pulled his head through the narrow seats. He rode around the facility for half an hour before he finally spotted the sleek black corvette. She was long and cylindrical and tapered near the front to a fine point, two too-tiny wing projections made her look like a penguin trying to fly. Robert put the vehicle into neutral and turned off the engine for a slow coast the final hundred yards to her.

"Let's go, get your game faces on." The two dogs' ears bristled with anticipation at the words. He parked the warthog with the passenger side facing the underbelly access ramp and jumped out as quickly as he could, getting into a firing position as the dogs jumped out and began crawling towards the ship's landing gear.

With one hand he honked the horn several times and waited. A minute passed, and then another; Neville was about to approach closer when he heard the sound of hydraulics and the heavy black ramp disengaged with a hiss. Two teenagers, about eighteen or nineteen, crouched down the ramp, two rifles pointed towards the warthog.

"Put down your weapon's now or I'll open fire!" Neville shouted to them.

"We don't want no trouble mister." The boy in front replied. His voice was soft, and young. Had Neville not been staring at him he would have thought it a girl's, but that was foolish. Three years with only his own deep baritone had left him unused to the sound of others. He was tempted to just shoot them here and take the bird; they were close and easy shots to his practiced and steady hands. They were young and scared shitless; he could see them quivering slightly, their rifle barrels unsteady as they inched closer to the pavement.

"You're not with the military, are you?"

"No sir. Listen we just want to find some place to sleep here without a fuss or anything. I've got enough money."

"If you're not with the military where'd you get that spacecraft?"

"My, my dad's a general. I....we..."

The boy's accomplice nudged him and whispered something Neville could only figure to be stop what he was saying.

"We stole it. We had to get away from them."

"How many of you are there?" Robert queried, hoping he had enough room to house all of them in the area he could lock off from the outside.

"Four of us."

"Safety your weapons and put them on the ground. Get the others and put your stuff on the car. It'll be dark soon so we have to hurry."

"No, we can find a room somewhere else. I've got enough money. We just need a ride, that's all."

There was a placid silence for a moment as Robert came to the realization that these people had no idea what had happened here. They were expecting a concierge and waitresses, stop lights and pedestrians. They were expecting normality. Or their version of it. Normalcy had a completely different meaning to Robert now. His normalcy was that of a hermit, secluded and relatively peaceful-except for the, you know, parasitic hostile organisms that hunted him daily and killed an entire world.

"Somewhere else? Son, you're in for a big surprise. Like I said, hurry up and load. We've got to get back soon."

The ride back was tense. The two boys had each brought a love interest with them, and the entire group was silent. Tango and Rambo could barely fit in the rear seat with them, and everything behind the driver's seat was a mixture of dog fur and ruffled clothes.

"Do you know exactly where you are?"

"I'm not entirely sure. I picked a colony at random. Anywhere was better than where we're coming from."

Neville just grunted and shook his head. He tapped the dashboard computer's history and brought up the classification from earlier.
_UNSC Lancet, Chiroptera Class Stealth Prowler- Decommissioned
January 21st, 2513- Crew 4. It made sense._

"Son, you stole the wrong ship."

"Listen man, I'm sorry about that. I am. We didn't mean anything, and we didn't hurt anyone to do it. We just had to get out of there. Don't report us man, we can't have that."

"I don't give a rat's ass about you stealing that ship. As a matter of fact I'm glad you did. Those Chiroptera class ships had problems with their stealth suite ever since they were rushed into service. So unfortunately for you, stealing a ship that was decommissioned before we even fought the Covenant meant that it still had this little paradise in its navigation computers."

The boy shook his head from the passenger seat. "So? So what? Why wouldn't this colony be in the computers? It's still here. I don't understand what's going on here."

"At least you got one thing right today. You sure as hell don't. But I can't blame ya. I've been here for three years and I haven't quite figured it out either. So why are you here anyway?"

The boy looked a bit confused and somewhat nervous. He glanced back to the rear passengers before looking ahead out the window. There were no cars and the grass along the roads was tall and unkempt.

There hadn't been cars for several miles now. That was odd, especially coming from such a large spaceport. Then he realized that no one had checked his registration or cleared him to land; he'd just done it.

"Where is everyone?" The boy asked.

"Waiting for the sun to go down." Robert laughed and sped up.

Bunker 124 A- Home

The vehicle storage gate lifted with a rattle, its heavy doors shaking as the motor strained to clear them. He pulled in with a sharp swerve and parked quickly. It had taken longer to get home than he'd hoped. The doors hadn't even recessed completely when he pushed the button again. They paused for a second before rattling back to life and closing.

"Wait a second." He put his hand on the boy's arm before he could open the latch. The inside of the vehicle bay was washed in a dim, irritating purple glow for a minute. The purple turned off and then regular white light kicked in. Decontamination Complete read the monitor. "Okay."

Neville stretched his back as he got out; it popped audibly and he grunted in appreciation. The four teens got out slowly and looked around. The other boy, who had until now been mute, spoke up suddenly.

"Listen man, I wanna know just what the fuck is going on here."

"Patrick, shut up."

"Fuck you Ryan. I'm tired of all this secrecy bullshit. I'm tired of running. I want to know why there was nobody at the goddamned spaceport, or on the road, or who this guy is, and why the hell he brought us to a bunker that decontaminated us in purple shit."

Neville turned to face the door, paused, and turned back around. "You've flown to hell. You don't know it yet, but whatever it is you're running from is infinitely better than what you've found. There was nobody at the spaceport for the same reason there was nobody on the road. They're all dead. Well, most of them. Those that aren't dead are Flood, and they come out at night to hunt. My name is Robert Neville, and I was a UNSC virologist working to stop the outbreak here, but I failed. I brought you to a bunker that decontaminated you in purple shit because one day that might save my life, which is to my thinking infinitely more important than yours, and that's why I do it. Personally, I drink too much and have all but given up on stopping them. The only reason I didn't shoot you where you stood today was because I feel somewhere inside of me a bit of humanity that begs me not to; that, and the dogs like you. Now I've been as kind to you as I can be and all I've gotten is guarded responses and something about running from something. So if you won't tell me any more than that I'll tell you two things. Through this door is a dining hall, where in fifteen minutes I will serve dinner. After that I'm putting you into your quarters and we can straighten

all of this out tomorrow. If you so much as think another machoistic, irritated thought like the high and mighty persona you've been putting on since you arrived I will show you first hand the horrors I have lived with on a daily basis for three years. Any questions?"

The quartet stood silently; one of the girls was crying and Patrick stood with mouth agape. Neville walked through the door and took out several frozen dishes. He stood at the counter for a moment, shaking his head and staring at the ceiling. _Way to go Robert. Always the thoughtful host. You've really lost your way with people old chap, really lost it. Whatever, fuck 'em. I should've shot 'em anyway. Maybe I will. No, I'm still human. That may be all I've got left, but I still have it. God I need a drink. _

4. Smoldering Ashes

Black coffee, scalding hot so that it burned his tongue and bit the lip through the ceramic. He needed the pain to keep him from indulging his better half. Every fiber within yearned for him to reach one more finger out for just another sip. But he'd have none of that today, not in front of the guests. Who the hell was he kidding? Guests? Four clueless teenagers on the lam choking down the frozen gruel he'd barely managed to suffice on; guests? Close enough, he thought.

"So who are you running from? And I'm asking in my nice voice this time," Robert said as he sat the cup on the counter.

"You really have no idea how fucked up it is out there, do you?" Ryan, the de facto leader, asked as he chewed through gristle.

"With all do respect, I figured it was fucked up enough down here for me. After the third month, they stopped broadcasting to me. I catch the occasional whisper of static once in a great while, but nothing discernable."

"It's gone man. The whole damn universe just gone right to hell. After the Covenant were gone, the people had nothing to do. All of the ships that'd been used to patrol the outer reaches, you know, the border colonies; they'd all gone back to Earth to defend her. Well, most of those colonists had never exactly sympathised with the UNSC in the first place ya know? Real hotbeds of dissent and whatnot. When the ships left, they started asking who would protect them if the Covenant came, ya know?"

"Nobody," Robert muttered quietly, listening more.

"I mean realistically, we all know that the few ships that we could've left around those colonies wouldn't have amounted to a pile of horse shit if the Covenant came; but the people needed that veil of safety. It was like when the pirates were around; they traded right under the UNSC's nose, but the people thought they were safe. So after a while, the people start to realize they don't need the UNSC after all. They're making it on their own, electing their own bosses to run stuff; life goes on ya know? Salutary neglect or some shit."

"After the whole war is over, people just want to go home. Nobody

wants to ship out to some backwater colony when they can go home to their families and get some rest. So the UNSC says fine, and they build a bunch of those tiny Liberty class ships and send only colonial citizen-soldiers back to each colony. "

Ryan and the others were taking careful bites of their food, not so much because it was godawful- which it was- but more because the group was in a sort of shared trance. Each one remembering back to the past and doing their hardest to remember it clearly.

"So we started hearing news of inner colony disputes and skirmishes; or so they said. They weren't sure, nobody was sure. We just heard that. But then it goes silent. Earth went silent man," Ryan shook his head vigorously and tapped the fork to the plate, "I mean fucking Earth. The center of our universe, the place everyone had fought so hard to protect...silent. But then it wasn't just Earth, it was all the inner colonies. One after another, like dominos just toppled over like the goddamn hand of god comes crashing down on them."

"Why'd it go silent?" Robert queried, quickly chastising himself for such a rude and dumb question.

"Who the fuck knows man? Earth goes silent, Harvest is gone, there is no chain of command anymore. So it leads to murmurs of unrest, some want to take the few ships we have and find out what happened; others, like Fletcher, say we should protect our own house. Tiny signs of smoke were all you could smell and then one day it was full-on insurrection by a few of the outer colonies and their ships. At first, we thought it'd be put down quickly. Anything like this had been before...but that was before. Earth wasn't there to stop it this time.

"Then it happened. I don't know how, or where from, or why. Some say it was a ship that brought them, some say they just crawled up from the fires of hell. That wasn't our planet, we weren't there to see that. But it spread, and it spread fast. Like it did here. Well guess who comes to the rescue? The Separatists, and their merry band of ships. They didn't save but three hundred refugees from that first planet; but that was all it took. The rest of the colonies either sided one ways or another, and it's been full on civil war ever since."

"You said the first planet?" Neville asked, suddenly fixated on what he knew had to be the Flood, oblivious to the fall of humanity in what should have been its finest hour. Her hope for a Phoenical rise from the ashes doused just as quickly as they'd started to smolder.

"They hadn't figured out how it spread at first. They were used to the phyiscal signs, ya know? Those little sucker things. But this was like a seed or a virus or something. At least that's what our doctors eventually figured out."

"How long ago?"

"How long ago since what?"

"Since they figured it out?"

"I dunno, a year or so. Maybe a year and a half. Back when there were

twelve broadcasting colonies."

Neville sat his cup down and shook his head wearily. He'd warned them nearly four years ago about this, and they'd done nothing. They'd sat on their asses smiling and waving as Death rode in on his great black horse Apocalypse.

"How many colonies are there now?"

"None," Patrick finally said in a quiet whisper, "none."

"Fletcher was nuking all the colonies that showed signs of infection. The fucking lunatic was murdering millions, and when it came down to us defending our own homes or his 'protection'..." There was a lingering silence, the beige tones in the room seemed darker and more foreboding. Even the air itself was suddenly heavier, and Robert felt like he had to take deeper breaths. He knew the answer to the question before he asked it.

"Your dad was a general?"

Ryan nodded somberly, keeping his head to his food as muffled sobs came out. Tears ran from under his hand and dripped onto the food, mixing with the greasy puddles already there. One of the girls came over and wrapped her arms around him, whispering in his ear and rubbing his back. Neville longed for that sensation- the warmth of a females touch, but also to be loved or needed by someone again. He felt a warm rush in his head and his lip quivered slightly.

"It was one Liberty ship against Fletchers twelve, and that man took eight of them down with him." Patrick spoke for his friend, his voice carrying a dignified quietness. "Fletcher swore the last thing he'd ever do is hunt him down for what he'd done."

"Your father's not dead?" Neville asked confusedly.

"He died in my arms on that ship. In my fucking arms, telling me that everything would be okay." Ryan bawled with heaving sobs, his chest rising and lowering in shuddering bursts. He gasped for air and kept crying.

"Fletcher doesn't know he's dead, does he?"

Patrick's eyes said everything. Fletcher didn't know he was dead, and he was going to finish them off.

"Well don't worry kid," Robert put a hand on the boy's back, "that dad of yours was right. Everything's gonna be alright."

5. Appetites

June 30, 2574

It was the closest thing to a shark in the darkness. Some had said the Covenant ships, with their smooth lines and bulbous exteriors, looked imposingly predatory. To Fletcher they'd looked like killer whales. His ship was quiet and gray with jagged lines and a slim, sleek profile that cut through the waters of oblivion that she'd been bred for. The "Butcher of Kanai" stood stone still, his eyes peering

into a void as icy as his soul. There was no air for sound or smell to travel through, yet he could tell. A single drop of blood across fifteen light-years.

"Admiral Fletcher, we believe we know where they are." Ensign Plutarsky said stoically.

"Yes Mr. Plutarsky, I know exactly where they are. They ripped a sub-space hole big enough for a junior cadet to find." The imposing figure didn't move a muscle while responding, his thick rust-colored beard masking his lips as he spoke.

"Indeed sir. Shall we proceed immediately?"

"Send a probe through first. I want tactical reconnaissance first; we can't afford another incident like last time. Wherever General Archer went he did so for a purpose, and I will not stumble headlong into one of his traps."

"Right away, sir. We should be able to have an update within twenty-four hours." The ensign nodded and began to turn away.

"Mr. Plutarsky," Fletcher asked with a slight cock of his head.

"Yes sir?"

"What would you do to someone who's taken everything you'd dreamed for?"

"I'm not sure I've given it much thought sir, but I'm sure it would be measurable."

"Think on it would you, and tell me when you come up with something."

"Yes sir."

Fletcher took three steps to his command console and had a seat. His admiralship was nothing as he'd wished. His flagship was a minuscule Liberty cruiser barely a quarter of the size of the lavishly designed fleet destroyers. The command console was slim and metallic with synthetic rubber armrests that rubbed his skin raw from only a few minutes' touch. What fleet he had been able to command had been decimated not by rabid ideological collection of xenomorphs, but by another Academy graduate. He was not a man without morals, as some had painted him with fantastical pseudonyms and gruesome tales; instead, he knew that it would be his determination to do what was necessary that would save the universe. His lips parsed into a thin smile, and the smell of blood was in the air.

Probe twenty-two exited sub-space as quietly as it had entered. The spherical, three meter ball of antenna arrays and scanning equipment tumbled into normalcy without a fuss. Within seconds an electronic tendril shot through the solar system, and just as quickly it wrapped around its prey. A UNSC technical satellite was still operational above an uncharted planet. Probe twenty-two sent out a hand-shake protocol laced with an intuitive counter-measures package. UNSC Tech-Map Satellite 34's outbound transponder was non-functional.

Twenty-two carefully moved into position and attached to the dysfunctional orbiter. It's low-frequency receiver was in working order and picking up signals twenty-two had not been equipped for. Repeating low-band radio signals from the planet below. P-22's systems cross-checked for known inhabitants and all reports yielded negatives. With as much fervor as an autonomous super-orbital and sub-space RecSat could muster it recorded the message through four loops and synthesized them together to clean up any distortions.

Satisfied, the probe detached from thirty-four and fell back into sub-space, eager to report its findings.

"I am First Lieutenant Robert Neville, and this is my warning. This planet is to be considered extremely dangerous and equally contaminated for Flood specimens. Against my personal wishes, I must advise that no form of rescue attempt to land on this planet, nor any attempt be made to fight this infection by conventional means. Turn away from this space immediately. May no man tread in this, Death's gray land. I am Lieutenant Robert Neville, last survivor of this planet, and this is my warning."

Fletcher gritted his teeth anxiously as he listened to the raspy, ominous recording. Ensign Plutarsky approached silently and stood to his side.

"Yes Ensign?"

"I've thought about it sir."

"And what would you do?"

"I, I'd go after him no matter what sir. I'd take everything he had and then I'd take some more."

The air in the Tactical Command room was as silent as space. Fletcher listened one more time as this lonely, scared voice cried into the darkness to nothing. Wounded bait. Engines flared briefly before the Tiburon blinked from existence and into the ethereal dimension of sub-space.

Plaza Neville Bunker

He swirled the amber liquid in the cup before him, it's white foam long fizzed away. He sniffed it, acrid and pungent as always. It was warm now, swirled for at least an hour as he sat and watched the sun go down. The visitors were standing outside, smoking and waiting. They could stay out for at least fifteen more minutes before it was unsafe. Neville downed the bitter concoction and it warmed his esophagus and seemingly fell with a thud into his stomach. Robert never had adjusted to dehydrated apple juice synthate. It'd been six days since he'd read his report or checked the same news again. Six days since he reminded himself of the pain. Most importantly, it'd been six days since he had a drink.

The crimson red blip of light overhead nearly gave him a heart attack. He leapt from the chair and dashed into his operations room. All of the monitors were blanketed with alerts and reports. Another ship, much bigger than chiroptera. This one was a Liberty class; and then a second, and third, and fourth. Fletcher.

"Hello," crackled the radio viciously, "are you out there Neville? I know you're out there."

Neville's hand moved for the panel, but he stopped. This was a murderer, a destroyer of worlds. He stayed his nerves and waited.

"Please, Mr. Neville! I just want your friend Archer. Give me that and your safety is guaranteed. Don't prolong your misery anymore. There's no need for solitude or loneliness. Just come out. Come out, Neville!"

He stumbled to the wall and slid slowly down. The voice just kept repeating, and there was no way to make it stop. It's subdued authority was transfixing. Come out, Neville. Come out. No more hiding. No more running. Just one move, and the world went back to normal. Slowly, weakly, he crawled to the keyboard-- and stared.

"Come out Neville, oh won't you come out?"

His hand hovered hesitatingly above the keys. Won't you come out? Go out Neville. Just. Go. Out._

End
file.